

## Confronting breast cancer - personal and public stories



**BARB GUY**

Betty Rollin is a journalist who has worked for the *New York Times*, PBS, and NBC. She's also a breast cancer survivor who wrote the classic book on the subject, *First, You Cry*.

She recently looked back to the cloistered time of her diagnosis, 1975, and the strange way Americans were dealing with cancer then: "No one even said the word 'cancer'; not too many people said the word 'breast' and even fewer said the two words together."

It's impossible to picture now, with October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month emblazoned upon the grocery store, the gym, the high school.

But I remember. My mom was just under 50 and I was 10 in 1970 when she got word that she had breast cancer. Back then, she had no one in her life or in public life to whom she could

point and think, "She went before me." As Betty Rollin would later discover, "For all I know I was surrounded by one-breasted women but we didn't talk to each other because we were all hiding."

My mom had a radical mastectomy, the vicious kind practiced then, the kind we often can avoid now. Later, a pair of discreet women, strangers, came to our home and somberly taught my mom about the primitive, specialized clothing and prosthetics awaiting her. Reconstructive surgery was unheard of.

On my mom's four-year survival anniversary, Betty Ford received her bad news. One month after becoming first lady, Betty Ford got breast cancer and managed to speak the words out loud, beginning the long, difficult work of kicking down the stuck-fast door to frank discussion of women's health issues. On my mom's five-year anniversary, Betty Rollin began her journey.

Maggie was recovering from chemo when I moved in next door to her. I was 26 and Maggie was a bit older than I, but young for breast cancer. She and I would sit in the sun together drinking tea as she tried to shake the chill of chemo.

Born in Holland but a New Zealander by choice, Maggie

loved skiing at Brighton, traveling the world, blue flowers and Greenpeace. She was trained as a nurse but rarely traditionally employed. She frequently sat overnight with people who were gravely ill. When I was away from home for six months, she sent me packages with funny thrift-store stuffed animals and lovely letters. Breast cancer killed her one cell at a time.

Pam didn't have breast cancer; she had a heart attack giving birth. The doctors gave Pam, a single mother, six months to live. Her sister Ellen gave up her Ph.D. program and her beloved city, San Francisco, to move to Salt Lake in order to be a kind of mom for Pam's newborn baby, and care for Pam.

Ellen shelved her dream to be a child psychologist. She changed everything about her life overnight and did it with grace and good cheer. Then out of nowhere, Ellen got breast cancer. Within months, she was dead. Six years later, Pam died, too.

In 1992 Terry Tempest Williams, Utah's fine, fiery writer, gave the world a new kind of *First, You Cry*, her own book, *Refuge*, which is partly about her mom's breast cancer and the breast cancer that's clustered in their family. By the time Terry's devastating, beautiful book came out, I was

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well-sold on the idea that breast cancer is the enemy.

Now Julie. Jules is the youngest and bubbliest of my friends to get breast cancer. Thrown in as co-workers, we were instant friends; it's been a decade since we worked together but our happy friendship continues. She was diagnosed last spring at only 32; the littlest of her three children was still breast feeding.

The nastiness of her particular cancer and her alarmingly young age are requiring her to jump through a lot of hoops before her doctors will say she's cured. Her scary struggle humbles me, but her effervescence, her sweet, funny way and her ability to ask for help give me hope.

Jules is a survivor, still working for her one-year anniversary. Each year's milestone will be more meaningful than the last. Jules, as well as Susanne, Dale, Luci, Colleen and my other friends who are on this journey, are heroic because they just keep going. They know they're lucky to get the chance.

Twenty-five years after my mom's breast cancer, she was riding a camel in Morocco. Betty Rollin marked her 25-year anniversary with a new edition of her book. Betty Ford was receiving the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest award Congress can bestow on a citizen.

My wish for Jules' 25th: She takes a lavish, tropical trip with

her husband Travis and their kids and grandkids. Someone mentions breast cancer and the grandkids have never heard of it. Not because it's taboo, but because it's extinct.

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*Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.*